Dear Chair

Please find attached a letter which highlights key themes from our commissioned report *Next Steps: developing specialist education support for deaf children in Northern Ireland*. The report can be accessed here:

https://cms.ndcs.org.uk/sites/default/files/2025-08/Next%20steps%20-%20Developing%20specialist%20education%20support%20for%20deaf%20children%20in%20Northern%20Ireland%E2%80%AF.pdf

We welcome the Committee's Inquiry and hope you find the attachment and report useful in your important work in this area.

Please do not hesitate to contact us if we can provide any further information.

With kind regards,

Jacqueline

Jacqueline Melville
Head of Policy and Influencing, Northern Ireland
The National Deaf Children's Society

The NICVA Building
61 Duncairn Gardens

Belfast

BT15 2GB
Direct line: [redacted]

www.ndcs.org.uk

My working days are Wednesdays to Fridays.

National Deaf Children's Society
NORTHERN IRELAND

61 Duncairn Gardens, Belfast BT15 2GB
T 020 7490 8656 E nioffice@ndcs.org.uk
Helpline 0808 800 8880
ndcs.org.uk

20 November 2025.

Dear Chair

The National Deaf Children's Society (NDCS) warmly welcomes the Committee for Education's Inquiry into a Strategic Review of Current Special Educational Needs (SEN) Provision and Transformation Agenda.

We recognise the importance of the Committee's work in exploring the challenges within existing Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) support and in seeking to ensure the Department's SEN Reform and Transformation Agenda delivers meaningful improvements for all children with SEND. Ensuring timely access to high quality, specialist SEND support is vital for many deaf children and young people, regardless of age or type of early years or education setting.

The Education Authority's Sensory Service provides specialist support for children and young people with hearing loss and access to Teachers of Deaf Children and Young People who work with children and families from the point at which deafness is identified (including providing support in the family home and from infancy) through to deaf children leaving education. The Sensory Service is central to the provision of early years and educational support to deaf children and young people.

About Deaf Children and Young People

- There are approximately 1,753 deaf children in Northern Ireland.[1]
- More than half of deaf children have a mild or moderate level of deafness, just over a quarter have unilateral deafness, and less than a fifth have a severe or profound level of deafness.[2] All levels of deafness can significantly affect communication, education and wellbeing.
- Over three quarters of deaf children attend mainstream schools and about 40% of deaf children are recorded as having an additional SEN.[3]

[1] McCall J. (2025) Next Steps: Developing specialist education support for deaf children in Northern Ireland, NDCS. www.ndcs.org.uk/about-us/campaigns/our-campaigns/developing-specialist-education-support-deaf-children-northern-ireland
[2] CRIDE (2023) Education provision for deaf children in Northern Ireland in 2022/23, NDCS. https://cms.ndcs.org.uk/sites/default/files/2025-05/CRIDE%20Northern%20Ireland%20-%202023.pdf
[3] McCall J. (2025) Next Steps: developing specialist education support for deaf children in Northern Ireland, NDCS. www.ndcs.org.uk/about-us/campaigns/our-campaigns/developing-specialist-education-support-deaf-children-northern-ireland

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- Deaf children have a higher prevalence of mental health concerns than their peers, with almost 21% reporting at least one psychological condition compared to about 12% of hearing children.[4]
- Over 90% are born to hearing parents, most with no experience of deafness.
- *When early identification of deafness is followed quickly by high quality specialist intervention, deaf children can achieve the same outcomes as other children.*

Next Steps report

NDCS welcomes the Department's commitment to maintaining the Sensory Service as a single, centralised service in recognition of the high level of specialist expertise required to meet the needs of deaf children and young people. However, we are keen to ensure the Service is able to benefit from opportunities to continue to develop and, as part of this, commissioned the *Next Steps: Developing specialist education support for deaf children in Northern Ireland* report[5] which sought to identify how the Service could be strengthened going forward. We would like to acknowledge the openness and support from EA and the Sensory Service to the report being undertaken as well as the support from other professionals and families who shared their experiences and insights.

For NDCS, the report highlights three key areas:

- *Deaf children at the centre of reform* – the needs of deaf children and families should be represented in all aspects of the Department's Reform Agenda. Reform should ensure better multiagency working, particularly across education and health services, and there should be equitable access to specialist support.
- *A stronger Sensory Service* – a more sustainable Service structure with a wider range of roles to support further development of specialisms within the Service, to broaden the ways deaf children can be directly supported and to ensure progression routes for staff would be beneficial. There should be a clear pathway for all deaf children with any level of hearing loss, with particular

[4] Byrne B. and MacNamee C. (2002) The emotional well-being of deaf children and young people in Northern Ireland, QUB. https://pure.qub.ac.uk/files/616887524/Final_Report_Byrne_and_McNamee.pdf
[5] McCall J. (2025) Next Steps: developing specialist education support for deaf children in Northern Ireland, NDCS. https://cms.ndcs.org.uk/sites/default/files/2025-08/Next%20steps%20-%20Developing%20specialist%20education%20support%20for%20deaf%20children%20in%20Northern%20Ireland%E2%80%AF.pdf

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ndcs.org.uk

consideration given to supporting children in early years, with additional or complex needs and who use sign language.

- *Better outcomes for deaf children* – the Sensory Service and other services should develop an outcomes and monitoring framework that focuses on how well deaf children are doing and makes sure the support they receive is helping them. The views of deaf children and their families should be at the heart of this and data from the Department's Reform Agenda Outcomes Framework should be disaggregated for deaf children.

Moving forward

The example of a pathway for deaf children, as noted above, provides one illustration of how the areas highlighted by the report could be further developed: *"The work of the Sensory Service could be better supported by the development of an integrated pathway for deaf children. This would provide a collaborative and multidisciplinary approach to ensure that children and their families receive comprehensive and coordinated interventions, and support to address clinical and educational needs, including technology, communication needs and access to a language-rich environment."*[6]

An integrated pathway would: establish clear roles and responsibilities across different services and sectors; focus on early identification, assessment, and intervention as well as ongoing support; include different pathway strands for different groups of children (such as, those in early years or with additional or complex needs) and put in place detailed protocols, professional guidelines, and quality standards across services included in the pathway, including for example, the Sensory Service, paediatric audiology, speech and language therapy, education services, and voluntary sector organisations.

An integrated pathway recognises that deaf children and young people are supported by a wide range of services and professionals across different settings and that the Sensory Service does not operate in isolation. In line with this, a broader approach to ensuring deaf children and families receive the support they need is important, alongside making sure the Sensory Service and deaf children are connected to and benefit from the wider Reform Agenda in education. Ensuring that the experiences of deaf children and families are central to decision-making and implementation

[6] McCall J. (2025) Next Steps; developing specialist education support for deaf children in Northern Ireland, NDCS, pp34.

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61 Duncairn Gardens, Belfast BT15 2GB
T 020 7490 8656 E nioffice@ndcs.org.uk
Helpline 0808 800 8880
ndcs.org.uk

throughout the Reform Agenda is vital to making sure it delivers for deaf children and supports them to thrive, flourish and reach their full potential across Northern Ireland.

Please do not hesitate to contact us if you would like any further information.

With kind regards,

Déirdre Vaughan

Déirdre Vaughan
Government Relations Advisor

Next Steps: Developing specialist education support for deaf children in Northern Ireland

National Deaf Children's Society NORTHERN IRELAND

Jolanta McCall, MA, MSc
Additional writing by
Dr Jane Evans • 2025

Foreword

A window of opportunity for change

It is a time of change in Northern Ireland. The Northern Ireland Assembly and Executive was restored on 3 February 2024, bringing an opportunity in this 2024 to 2027 mandate to strengthen key statutory services and support for deaf children, young people and their families.

The Department of Education has prioritised reforming Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) provision so that it will better meet the needs of children and young people. This has now been agreed as a priority across the Executive in the recently published Programme for Government ‘Our Plan: Doing What Matters Most’.

In October 2024, the Assembly also passed a motion highlighting the importance of specialist support for deaf children and young people. During this debate, the Education Minister noted the importance of ensuring the sustainability of the Education Authority Sensory Service, referencing the potential of this report to inform work in that area. These developments are to be warmly welcomed.

For all deaf children

It is also a time of change in our understanding of deafness, the diverse needs of deaf children, young people and their families, and how access to the right services can make a powerful difference in their lives. Each deaf child is unique, and we know that every moment counts in how they and their families are supported to ensure they can flourish. Embedding a whole child approach to specialist support that seeks to secure the best possible outcomes for each deaf child alongside a focus on early intervention is critical to achieving this. Nothing should hold deaf children back and their achievements and outcomes should be equal to those of their hearing peers.

Vital specialist support – the Education Authority Sensory Service

The Education Authority Sensory Service provides vital specialist support for the majority of deaf children in Northern Ireland from the point of identification, during the early years and throughout education. The Sensory Service plays a key role in providing expertise and continuity of access to wider support systems for deaf children and their families. It also fosters the positive family interactions that form the basis for strong and meaningful attachments, successful social experiences, and future development and learning. Additionally, the Sensory Service assists families in making informed choices regarding hearing technologies, language and communication approaches and education settings.

This report shows the value of the Sensory Service and its staff to other professionals and to many deaf children and their families while also highlighting areas for further development, both within the Sensory Service and across the wider context it operates within. The National Deaf Children's Society has welcomed the Department of Education's decision to maintain the Sensory Service as a central unified service, in recognition of the level of specialism required to properly support deaf children, but this must now be accompanied by a commitment to strengthen the Sensory Service.

Three key themes

There are three key themes from the report. With the right level of government support and commitment, these can become a reality so that nothing holds deaf children back:

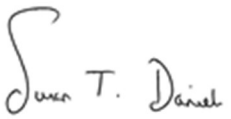
- **Deaf children at the centre of reform**: deaf children, young people and their families should be represented in all aspects of the Department of Education's reform of SEND provision. Reform should ensure better multiagency working, particularly for those working in education and health services as well as the voluntary and community sector. All deaf children and their families deserve equitable access to specialist services wherever they live.
- **A stronger Sensory Service**: the Sensory Service should be made more sustainable by putting in place a new structure that supports the development of specialisms and a wider range of roles. The new structure should ensure that a strong pathway is in place for all deaf children with every level of hearing loss from the point of identification. Particular consideration should be given to supporting children in the early years and children with additional or complex needs. The Sensory Service should also keep improving its support for children using sign language.
- **Better outcomes for deaf children**: the Sensory Service and other services should develop an outcomes and monitoring framework that focuses on how well deaf children are doing and makes sure the support they receive is helping them. To achieve this, we will need robust data to build a richer understanding of the profile of deaf children in Northern Ireland. The views and experiences of deaf children, young people and their families should be at the heart of this.

Thank you

I would like to thank the Education Authority, the Head of the Sensory Service and the wider staff team for their openness to this report, and for generously sharing data as well as their reflections on the Service and its work. We acknowledge that the Sensory Service has continued to develop its work over this period and hope the report further supports this, going forward.

I would also like to acknowledge the range of professionals who made time to participate in and contribute to this work. In particular, I want to thank the deaf children, young people, parents and carers who gave their time and shared their experiences and valuable insights with such willingness.

Finally, I would like to thank Jolanta McCall and Dr Jane Evans for their work in producing this report.



Susan Daniels OBE
Chief Executive
The National Deaf Children's Society

Contact details

Jolanta McCall, MA, MSc

Independent Consultant in Special Educational Needs and Disabilities, Deafness and Complex Needs. Qualified Teacher of Deaf Children and Young People and Educational Audiologist.

jolamccall@aol.com

Dr Jane Evans

Independent social research consultant specialising in work with children and young people and the policy issues that affect them.

janeevans724@gmail.com

Acknowledgments

Thank you to all the professionals, children and parents and carers who engaged with and contributed to the project, and for the warm welcome offered throughout, in online and in-person meetings and exchanges. The views and experiences shared yielded valuable insights and are integral to the report, its findings and recommendations.

The views herein are those of the author.

National Deaf Children's Society
E ndcs@ndcs.org.uk
ndcs.org.uk

Please contact us if you would like this report in a different format.

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1.0 Executive summary

The National Deaf Children's Society commissioned this report to inform the planning and provision of specialist educational support for deaf children in Northern Ireland at a time of change and reform in services and policy for children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND). The report is timely because deaf children and the specialist services supporting them must be included in forthcoming government policies and delivery for children with SEND.

The report examines how the Education Authority (EA) Sensory Service supports deaf children and their families, and explores ways to improve the Sensory Service to better meet the diverse needs of deaf babies, children, young people and their families.

1.1 The report

The report is intended to serve as a guide towards the development of a more sustainable and effective Sensory Service for deaf children, young people and their families. The approach to the report included a desk-based review of quality standards, legislative and policy documents, and unpublished information and data provided by the Sensory Service. Engagement was also undertaken with Sensory Service staff and a small number of other professionals, deaf children and families through surveys, focus groups, workshops, meetings and email exchanges.

The findings highlight strengths such as teamwork and collaboration, staff development and innovation, and positive relationships with children and families. Challenges were identified, including geographic inequity, difficulties in sharing information, skills and training needs, staffing and meeting the diverse needs of all deaf children.

1.2 Strengths in the Sensory Service

1.2.1 Teamwork and collaboration

Sensory Service staff work closely with health, social care, voluntary sector organisations (such as the British Deaf Association, Action Deaf Youth and the National Deaf Children's Society) and EA internal teams like the psychology service. The Sensory Service supports deaf children in both mainstream and special schools as well as in the home. The Sensory Service feels that views of deaf children, young people, parents and carers are central to its work, so that children are at the heart of the service. Additionally, Sensory Service staff stress that there is good communication among staff, who respect, value and support each other in both professional and personal matters.

1.2.2 Staff development and innovation

The Sensory Service employs a relatively high percentage of Teachers of Deaf Children and Young People (ToDCYP) who are deaf and who offer positive role models to deaf children and their families. Staff retention is high, although several staff will be retiring in the next few years. Whenever possible, the Sensory Service

engages in research studies, such as a recent Caption Education Project about captioning software used for notetaking and captioning, which could help support the way deaf children and young people learn.

1.2.3 Relationships with children and families

Most children stated they feel they do well in school, enjoy school some or all of the time, including break and lunchtimes, and have friends in school. Many parents praised their ToDCYP for their pre- and post-teaching sessions, liaison with mainstream schools and advocacy for their children. More than one parent or carer described their ToDCYP as their “rock” and as “going above and beyond” in supporting their children. Parents and carers were sometimes concerned because, although they recognised that a change of ToDCYP can be positive for their child, the change is sometimes forced by circumstances. For example, parents stressed that a change of ToDCYP should not occur at the transition points when children are changing school.

1.2.4 Promoting deaf identity

Deaf identity and positive role models were important to parents and carers. One parent welcomed the fact that a ToDCYP allocated to their child was deaf themselves, providing a positive role model. Another parent praised the work their child’s ToDCYP did around deaf identity and confidence.

1.3 Challenges in providing services for deaf children in Northern Ireland

1.3.1 Geographic inequity

Specialist education provision, such as the primary and post-primary schools with dedicated resource provision and the specialist school for deaf and visually impaired children, are all based in the Greater Belfast area, leading to inequitable access to services for children in other parts of Northern Ireland. In addition, Sensory Service staff have to travel longer when visiting large or remote areas, which reduces the time available for other tasks such as administration. There is no pre-school or nursery setting with resource provision for deaf children in Northern Ireland.

1.3.2 Sharing information and multiagency working

Some stakeholders who wanted better communication with the Sensory Service reported difficulties in sharing information between services, including not knowing who to contact directly. Parents also raised this issue and wanted improved communication between services.

1.3.3 Skills and training needs

The increase in numbers of deaf children with additional and complex needs means there is a need for staff to be upskilled to support those children. There is no initial teacher training for ToDCYPs in Northern Ireland and this should be explored. An apprenticeship route to qualifications was suggested.

1.3.4 Staffing and workload

The Sensory Service is a service under strain. Although retention is good, this is likely to be affected by retirement in the coming years. Encouraging specialisation and improving opportunities for career progression would enhance the attractiveness of the ToDCYP role and encourage more people to train and qualify. Changing the flat organisational structure would ease the workload of the Head of the Sensory Service and allow for some career progression for senior staff. Widening the range of roles within the Sensory Service would also be beneficial.

1.3.5 Children on the Sensory Service caseload

The Sensory Service is facing increasing levels of challenge due to the growing diversity and complexity of needs among the children requiring support. The increase in numbers of deaf children with additional or complex needs means there is a need for staff to be upskilled to support those children. Some parents felt ToDCYPs had limited knowledge about other conditions and that a tailored pathway for these children should be developed. It is also important that a stronger early years pathway is developed and that specialist support is provided at the earliest possible stage for all children. An integrated pathway approach across services can reduce any duplication and ensure that children receive the most appropriate and timely support.

Children who are placed on the advice caseload in the Sensory Service may not receive direct ToDCYP support or may have only limited visits. Parents did not feel this was enough and would like more support for their children. Families should receive clear information about how the Sensory Service is supporting their child and meeting their needs.

1.4 Conclusions

The SEND reforms in Northern Ireland must take account of the needs of deaf children and delays in commencing legislation must now be addressed. To understand the levels and prevalence of need, there is a need for robust data to be collected and published about deaf children in Northern Ireland.

While the interim structure of the Sensory Service and efforts to improve and strengthen performance are positive, it is recommended that the future strategy for the Sensory Service and its configuration is based on an evaluation of outcomes for deaf children and that this includes the views of deaf children, young people and their families.

1.5 Recommendations

The report makes 8 recommendations to improve the EA Sensory Service and provision for deaf children, young people and their families. Many of the recommendations reflect themes highlighted in the Department of Education's 'End to End Review of Special Educational Needs' and can support work to progress the 'Special Educational Needs Reform Agenda'.

Recommendation 1: Deaf children must be included in SEND reforms

Recommendation 2: Earliest possible support for deaf children

Recommendation 3: Tailored support for children who have additional or complex needs

Recommendation 4: Information and support for all deaf children

Recommendation 5: Increased opportunities for professional collaboration and communication

Recommendation 6: Workforce planning and enhancing training for ToDCYPs

Recommendation 7: An equitable geographical spread of educational services

Recommendation 8: An evidence-based, outcomes focused approach to service delivery

The recommendations were drawn from the findings of engagement with all stakeholders.

Recommendation 1

Deaf children to be included in Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) reforms

The Department of Education's 'Special Educational Needs Reform Agenda' must place equal emphasis on deaf children and young people. To develop effective and adequately resourced support services, reforms should be based on evidence about and from deaf children and their families. Reform must take account of the needs of deaf children and should address issues like delays in commencing SEND legislation and multiagency working between services, such as education and health.

The Sensory Service should remain a centralised, specialist service for deaf children, young people and their families, with teams operating across Northern Ireland. Additional support should be provided to ensure the Sensory Service is sustainable and can meet the diverse needs of deaf children and their families.

Recommendation 2

Earliest possible support for deaf children

Although not all types of SEND can be diagnosed in infancy, deafness can often be identified from birth through the Newborn Hearing Screening Programme or in a child's early years. This creates opportunities for joint working with health and social care services and for providing early interventions across all areas of child development. Teachers of Deaf Children and Young People (ToDCYPs) play a critical role in early years intervention through direct work with deaf babies, children and their families.

The Sensory Service should continue work to further develop early years support and should consider developing a robust pathway for deaf children in early years with education, health and social care services, voluntary sector organisations and deaf children and their families. This should include: setting out clear policies on how every young deaf child and their family are supported; exploring pre-school or nursery provision for deaf children; making sure children and families are supported from the point of referral, regardless of the school calendar; and putting in place a programme of specialist training.

This principle of early specialist input should also apply where deafness is identified or occurs later in a child or young person's life including for example, where this occurs through progressive hearing loss, trauma or infection.

Recommendation 3

Tailored support for children who have additional or complex needs

The percentage of deaf children with additional or complex needs is increasing year by year. How deaf children with additional or complex needs are supported by the Sensory Service in mainstream or special schools, including where deafness may not be the primary need, should be prioritised. Upskilling is also needed in the Sensory Service workforce to support these children and their families at home. This should be reflected in the development of a clear pathway in the Sensory Service's framework for deaf children with additional or complex needs.

Recommendation 4

Information and support for all deaf children

Information for deaf children and families, including those on the advice caseload, should be reviewed to ensure that children and families receive tailored information about how the Sensory Service allocates and provides support to children and how the support provided meets the needs of deaf children and young people. Seeking feedback from families, schools and other professionals, to gain a holistic understanding of a child's deafness and its impact, alongside other factors and vulnerabilities such as additional needs, can support resource allocation and make sure that children receive the support they need.

A new structure and framework for the Sensory Service, with a wider range of roles and responsibilities, may make it possible to manage this more effectively.

Recommendation 5

Increase opportunities for professional collaboration and communication

Communication and multiagency working between professionals working with deaf children needs to be improved. This relates to both support and services for individual children and families but also opportunities for professionals to discuss

wider concerns and identify and address gaps in services for children and families across areas. Children's Hearing Services Working Groups (CHSWGs), where services, professionals, voluntary sector organisations and parents can meet to discuss issues for deaf children, are not in place in each health and social care trust area. These, or similar mechanisms that support multiagency communication and collaboration, should be considered. This would provide opportunities to ensure that clear pathways in the planning and commissioning of services for deaf children and families are in place, and support co-production of pathways across all stakeholders.

Recommendation 6

Workforce planning and enhancing training for Teachers of Deaf Children and Young People (ToDCYPs)

Strong links should be made with training providers to ensure that there is a pipeline of suitably qualified professionals from which to recruit. Training for ToDCYPs being available in Northern Ireland should be explored. At the same time, a long-term programme of specialising, skills upgrading and career progression should be encouraged in the Sensory Service to further improve retention of existing staff and improve the offer to deaf children and their families. This could include support: for early years; for children with additional or complex needs; and for children across all approaches to communication, including sign language. This should also explore training and development pathways for other deaf specialist roles, such as communication support workers and specialist classroom assistants, to support service sustainability and succession planning.

Recommendation 7

Equitable geographical spread of educational services

Specialist educational provision for deaf children, such as schools with dedicated resource provision, should be available outside of the Greater Belfast area to make sure that all deaf children and their families can equitably access an education appropriate to their needs.

There can be benefits in resource provision that is led by a qualified ToDCYP and centrally managed by sensory services to provide a level of flexibility in allocating and adapting resource and support to meet needs. Arrangements between the Sensory Service and schools with resource provision should be reviewed. Consideration should also be given to whether the Sensory Service managing this provision directly would be beneficial, offering increased flexibility in providing deaf specialist support to children across Northern Ireland.

Recommendation 8

An evidence-based, outcomes-focused approach to service delivery

An evidence-based, outcomes-focused approach to service delivery and evaluation is recommended. This involves tailoring outcomes to the specific context and needs

of each child, which can include broad goals like ensuring appropriate educational placements, as well as specific objectives like developing age-appropriate communication skills. Agreed and consistent data should be used to identify deaf children and monitor, track and report outcomes. Planning and evaluation should include the views of deaf children, young people and their families, and regular feedback from children and families should be developed.

2.0 Introduction

2.1 Purpose of the report

The National Deaf Children's Society commissioned this report to inform the planning and provision of specialised educational support for deaf[1] children and young people in Northern Ireland. Currently, substantial changes and reforms are underway in the structure and operation of education provision for children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND).[2]

The report aims to inform the review and reform process being conducted by the Department of Education about SEND provision in Northern Ireland to ensure that deaf children and the specialist services supporting them are included in new government developments and initiatives.

The report examines how the Education Authority (EA) Sensory Service supports deaf children and their families, and explores ways to improve the Sensory Service to better meet the diverse needs of deaf babies, children, young people and their families.

Engagement for the report was carried out with a range of stakeholders connected with deaf children, including children and their families.

3.0 Approach to the report

A desk-based review was carried out, which included reviewing quality standards, legislative and policy documents, reviews of education provision and unpublished information and data provided by the Sensory Service. The report was shared with the Sensory Service to verify the use of unpublished data before completion.

Direct engagement was also undertaken with a range of professionals, including the Sensory Service staff team and a small number of deaf children[3] and families. Children and families, as well as professionals and services, came from a range of geographic areas across Northern Ireland. The engagement through surveys, focus groups, meetings and email exchanges was intended to provide a snapshot of perspectives rather than a representative sample of views from either professionals

[1] The term deaf is used in this report to include all types and levels of deafness and hearing loss.
[2] The phrase Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) is used throughout, unless referring to the legislation, guidance or documents that use the phrase Special Educational Needs (SEN).
[3] Where the report refers to children, this includes children and young people.

or deaf children and families. The report provides valuable insights based on the views and experiences of those who contributed.

Policy review, data gathering, analysis and engagement with stakeholders took place between August and November 2024, and reflects the information and engagement with stakeholders from this timeframe.

3.1 Engagement and participants

3.1.1 Professionals

Meetings were held with a range of stakeholders including the Sensory Service, through meetings with the Head of Service and a half-day workshop with the staff team. During the workshop, assistive listening devices were used with software currently in trial by the Sensory Service under the Caption Education Project to facilitate the full participation of deaf staff. Meetings were also held with schools with a dedicated resource provision for deaf children and young people, the specialist school for deaf and visually impaired children and the British Association for Teachers of Deaf Children and Young People (BATOD).[4] There was also engagement with a paediatric audiologist, a social worker from a health and social care trust sensory support team and a Children's Hearing Services Working Group (CHSWG).[5] The CHSWG contribution included professionals working in that health and social care trust area from paediatric audiology, speech and language therapy, the Deaf Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service, the specialist school for deaf and visually impaired children, the Sensory Service and a number of voluntary sector agencies working with deaf children and families.

3.1.2 Children and families

Engagement was undertaken with a small number of school-aged deaf children through a survey, and with parents and carers[6] through a separate survey and two online focus groups facilitated by the National Deaf Children's Society. These took place between September and October 2024. Information about the surveys was circulated by the National Deaf Children's Society, including through social media. Focus group participants, recruited from families known to the National Deaf Children's Society, were offered a voucher to recognise their contribution to the project. All participants, who were provided with information about the project and how information would be used, completed a consent process before participating.

Overall, 6 children completed surveys while 10 parents completed surveys and 8 attended 2 focus groups. Some parents may have completed surveys and attended a focus group. For parents who completed questionnaires or attended focus groups, the age of their children ranged from pre-school to 17 years old. Most attended

[4] BATOD promotes the educational interests of all deaf children, young people and adults and safeguards the interests of ToDCYPs.
[5] CHSWGs are multidisciplinary groups, made up of professionals from services including education and health, as well as parents. Their role is to take the lead in monitoring and developing integrated service delivery for deaf children and their families in their local area. There are a limited number of CHSWGS in Northern Ireland.
[6] The word 'parents' is used to include deaf children's parents, carers and guardians.

mainstream schools with Teacher of Deaf Children and Young People (ToDCYP) and classroom assistant support. The children's hearing loss ranged from mild to profound and included sensorineural and mixed deafness and hearing loss. All the children and young people were using hearing aids, cochlear implants or a combination of the two.

For those who completed surveys, half of the children had additional or complex needs. For those attending focus groups, the majority of children had additional needs to their deafness. Support for these needs was a key area of concern for parents and carers who took part. For those who attended focus groups, most children were using sign language to support their language and their deaf identity rather than as their main means of communication.

3.2 Methods of Inquiry

3.2.1 Aims and objectives

The aims of the engagement were to understand from professionals and deaf children and families:

- how services for deaf children and young people and their families work in Northern Ireland
- what in their opinion works well
- what are the challenges
- what are their ambitions and priorities

Focus groups with parents were asked:

- In what ways has your child's ToDCYP had a positive impact on your deaf child, you and your family? Could you share some examples of what works well?
- If you had a magic wand, what would you like a ToDCYP / the Sensory Service to do for deaf children and young people? What are the challenges and what needs to change?

Thank you to all the professionals, children and parents for engaging with and contributing to this project, and for the warm welcome offered throughout, in online and in-person meetings and exchanges. The views and experiences shared yielded valuable insights and are integral to the report, its findings and recommendations.

4.0 Policy overview

The Northern Ireland Executive's 'Children and Young People Strategy 2020–2030'[7] sets out the commitment of government to work towards all children in Northern

[7] Northern Ireland Executive. 'Children & young people strategy 2020–2030'. education-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/education/final-execuitve-children-and-young-people per cent27s-strategy-2020-2030.pdf

Ireland achieving improved outcomes across key areas of their lives so that children: are physically and mentally healthy; enjoy play and leisure; learn and achieve; live in safety and stability; experience economic and environmental wellbeing; make a positive contribution to society; live in a society which respects their rights; and which promotes equality of opportunity and good relations.

These ambitions reflect the definition of children's wellbeing set out in the Children's Services Co-operation Act (Northern Ireland) 2015 and the Strategy states that it is rooted in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and recognises the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. The Department of Education, which holds a lead role in the development and implementation of the Strategy, has a stated vision that every child is happy, learning and succeeding.[8] This vision is no different for children and young people with SEND.

The Northern Ireland Executive and Assembly were restored in February 2024 following a period of absence of devolved government. The recently agreed Programme for Government (2024–2027)[9] states that better support for children and young people with SEND is a priority. This commitment follows on from a wide range of reports that have identified serious failings in education provision for children with SEND.[10] Against this backdrop, the Department for Education undertook an 'End to End Review of Special Educational Needs'.[11]

In January 2025, the Education Minister stated that the Review had concluded and a 'SEN Reform Agenda' was announced, along with a five-year delivery plan.[12] This maintains the Review's focus on children with SEND having the right support from the right people at the right time and in the right place. 'Right support' refers to high-quality, efficient and effective assistance that is evidence based. This support should be provided by confident and skilled teaching and support staff, who have access to further training and input from other professionals to improve their practice in classrooms. 'Right time' denotes the early identification of needs and timely intervention, while 'right place' signifies suitable educational settings. The Minister has acknowledged that the programme of reform will require continuous and sustained investment.

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[8] Department of Education. 'Every child. Department of Education's corporate plan 2023–28'. education-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/education/Every per cent20CHILD per cent20DE per cent20Corporate per cent20Plan per cent202023-2028.pdf

[9] Northern Ireland Executive. Programme for Government: 'Our plan: doing what matters most' northernireland.gov.uk/publications/programme-government-2024-2027-our-plan-doing-what-matters-most-documents

[10] See for example the 'Independent report review of SEN special educational needs services and processes' (2023) by IPSOS, the Northern Ireland Audit Office 'Impact review of special educational needs' (2020) and 'Too little, too late' (2020) by the NI Commissioner for Children and Young People (NICCY).

[11] Department of Education. End to End Review of Special Educational Needs. education-ni.gov.uk/articles/end-end-review-special-educational-needs-sen

[12] Department of Education. SEN Reform Agenda. education-ni.gov.uk/publications/sen-reform-agenda

Indeed, there has been a significant increase in the numbers and complexity of needs of children with SEND since 2020. The costs of SEND provision are projected to be £622 million in 2024-25.[13] The legislative backdrop to SEND is also undergoing a period of transition with much of the Special Educational Needs and Disability Act (Northern Ireland) 2016 and associated Regulations and Code of Practice not yet commenced. Across the considerable programme of review and reform during this period, it is important that deaf children and young people have access to high-quality education and enjoy good educational outcomes. The Department of Education is also currently leading development of the Executive's Early Learning and Childcare Strategy[14], which aims to support children's learning and development in early years and improve the affordability of childcare.

Moving away from education, the Sign Language Bill[15] has recently been introduced into the Northern Ireland Assembly. While this is at an early stage of the legislative process, the Bill and associated measures may strengthen access to sign language – both British Sign Language and Irish Sign Language – for deaf children in a range of settings, including education.

SEND systematic reforms relate to all special educational needs and disabilities including deafness. To date, there has not been significant focus on the needs and experiences of deaf children, young people and their families in wider discussions regarding SEND.

Reform must take account of the needs of deaf children and delays in commencing legislation should be addressed.

This is a timely opportunity to develop robust advice and recommendations to inform the Department of Education's considerations about the needs of deaf children young, people and their families.

5.0 Services for deaf children in Northern Ireland

There is limited available government data on deaf children in Northern Ireland, with published figures instead being made available by the Consortium of Research into Deaf Education (CRIDE).[16] Recent figures suggest there are at least 1,603 deaf

[13] Department of Education. Reform begins for children with special educational needs. education-ni.gov.uk/news/givan-reform-begins-children-special-educational-needs
[14] Department of Education. Executive Early Learning and Childcare Strategy. education-ni.gov.uk/articles/executive-early-learning-and-childcare-strategy#toc-0
[15] Northern Ireland Assembly. Sign Language Bill. niassembly.gov.uk/assembly-business/legislation/2022-2027-mandate/primary-legislation-bills-22-27-mandate/sign-language-bill/bill---as-introduced/ Both British Sign Language (BSL) and Irish Sign Language (ISL) are recognised in Northern Ireland and all references to sign language are inclusive of both. The Sensory Service has no children who use ISL on its current caseload.
[16] CRIDE is a consortium of voluntary sector agencies, academics and interested parties, including the National Deaf Children's Society. The published figures cover all types of permanent deafness, including unilateral, bilateral, sensorineural and conductive hearing loss.

children in Northern Ireland.[17] More than half have a mild or moderate level of deafness (57 per cent), while 27 per cent have unilateral deafness and 16 per cent a severe or profound level of deafness.[18]

Just over three quarters of deaf children attend mainstream schools (77 per cent) and 21 per cent attend special schools.[19] Thirty-six per cent of deaf children have an additional special educational need.[20] Fewer children attend specialist provisions, such as, the primary or post-primary school with dedicated resource provision or the specialist school for deaf and visually impaired children and young people. Both the primary school with resource provision and specialist school for deaf and visually impaired children offer sign language as part of communication approaches. All the specialist educational settings in Northern Ireland are in the Greater Belfast area.

5.1 The EA Sensory Service

The Sensory Service is one of a number of specialist support services provided by the EA in Northern Ireland. It is a requirement in the Special Educational Needs Code of Practice that specialist support services for deaf children and young people should be in place.

The Sensory Service supports deaf children from birth, or the point of identification of deafness, through to the end of school age and works with deaf children in their homes, in early years settings and in mainstream and special schools where they provide peripatetic support. The arrangements for schools with resource provision for deaf children and the specialist school for deaf and visually impaired children differ as they have dedicated specialist staff working in these settings. While resource provision in Northern Ireland is not directly managed by the Sensory Service, it does have links with the schools. A resource provision specifically caters to the needs of deaf children as an integral and specialist part of a mainstream school and provides support from a range of specialist staff to ensure the needs of the deaf pupils are fully met within the daily life of the school.

5.2 Teachers of Deaf Children and Young People (ToDCYPs)

ToDCYPs are qualified teachers who have undertaken additional training and achieved a qualification in being a ToDCYP. They provide wide-ranging support, which can include carrying out specialist assessments, monitoring personal amplification devices and advising on the use of technology such as radio aids and soundfield systems. They also focus on developing listening, spoken language, signing and communication skills in the home, ensuring school staff are teaching with good levels of deaf awareness and supporting children to develop their social skills and self-advocacy, accessing activities and preparing for adulthood. Partnership work is a key aspect of the ToDCYP role, in particular supporting families

[17] CRIDE (2024). Education provision for deaf children in Northern Ireland 2003-24. ndcs.org.uk/sites/default/files/2025-05/CRIDE%20Northern%20Ireland%20-%202024.pdf
[18] CRIDE (2023). Education provision for deaf children in Northern Ireland in 2022-23. ndcs.org.uk/sites/default/files/2025-05/CRIDE%20Northern%20Ireland%20-%202023.pdf
[19] *ibid*.
[20] *ibid*.

and teachers on areas, such as creating accessible language and communication environments, and adapting the curriculum to meet a deaf child's specific needs. Every school and setting where a deaf child is based can access advice and training from the Sensory Service.

Sensory services can vary in their configuration and, in addition to ToDCYPs, may also employ a range of other staff, such as, education audiologists, specialist classroom assistants, communication support workers, sign language instructors and others. In Northern Ireland, other than ToDCYP posts, the Sensory Service has two ToDCYPs who also hold education audiology qualifications. Education audiologists provide a key link between a deaf child's clinical and real-world experiences through verification and validation of personal amplification and listening environments, both at home and in school settings.

5.3 Deaf children supported by the Sensory Service

The data provided by the Sensory Service has not previously been published and there is some variation with the figures provided by CRIDE reports. It is important to note that there can be inconsistencies in figures regarding the number of deaf children and young people, depending, for example, on the data source, collection methods and the parameters or definitions included.

> Government needs to collect and publish robust and reliable data about deaf children in Northern Ireland to better understand the levels and prevalence of need.

5.3.1 Numbers of deaf children and services provided

Sensory Service data shows that there are 1,753 children up to 19 years old receiving a service in Northern Ireland of which 1,376 are active cases. Most children receiving a service are school aged. A quarter of referrals for the Sensory Service are for children identified via the Newborn Hearing Screening Programme.

Peripatetic caseload by school age group (August 2024)

	Pre-school	**Primary**	**Post-primary**	**Post-16**	**Total**
Active	228	605	469	74	1,376
Advice	18	142	183	34	377
Total	246	747	652	108	**1,753**

Peripatetic caseload by type of education placement (August 2024)

	Nursery	Primary	Post-primary	Post-16	Total
Mainstream Schools	51	499	484	67	1,101
Special schools	17	126	152	40	335

The Sensory Service identifies the percentage of deaf children with additional needs or complex needs[21] as increasing year by year. This trend requires a focus on how deaf children with additional or complex needs are supported, including in special schools where deafness may not be their primary need, as well as a focus on upskilling the Sensory Service workforce to support deaf children with additional needs who are supported at home or in mainstream or special schools.

The numbers of deaf children with additional or complex needs is increasing and requires an urgent focus as well as extra training for ToDCYPs.

The Sensory Service in the academic years 2020/21 to 2023/24

- The Service received 140 referrals during 2023/24 academic year, a decrease from 190 as reported in 2022/23.
- 23 per cent of referrals to the Service came from the Newborn Hearing Screening Programme, a decrease from the last two years from 40 to 32 referrals.
- 59 per cent of referrals to the Service were for children of school age.
- 25.8 full time equivalent ToDCYPs are employed across 5 regional offices in the Sensory Service.
- The average caseload allocation gives an indication of ToDCYP workload and depends on demand in the area and the needs of deaf children. Caseload allocation varies from 45 to 61 per ToDCYP.

[21] Additional or complex needs refers to any health or developmental condition in addition to deafness which impact on a child's daily life. For example, deafness as part of a genetic syndrome, Autistic Spectrum Disorder, Auditory Neuropathy Spectrum Disorder and learning disabilities. SEN guidance outlines overarching categories of need including: cognition and learning; communication, social, behavioural, emotional and wellbeing; speech, language and communication, sensory; and physical needs.

The range and complexity of need managed by the Sensory Service

- 77 per cent of school aged children are educated in mainstream schools.
- 23 per cent (335 pupils) are educated in special schools.
- Just under one per cent (14 students) attend mainstream schools with resource provision for deaf children.
- 40.8 per cent (704 children and young people) were recorded as having additional Special Educational Needs.
- Both the active and advice caseloads include children with mild, moderate, and severe sensorineural deafness; mild and moderate mixed deafness; mild, moderate and unilateral permanent deafness; and mild, moderate and unilateral temporary hearing loss.
- Of those children on the active case load 49 per cent had mild and unilateral deafness. A further 11 per cent had a temporary condition.
- 47 per cent of children on the advice case load have mild deafness and 39 per cent have unilateral deafness.
- There are 818 deaf children and young people with Statements of SEN, which represents nearly 47 per cent of deaf children and young people. This total includes Statements of SEN where deafness is not the primary need, for example children and young people attending special schools.
- Twenty pre-school children have been issued with Statements of SEN.

5.4 Operational arrangements

The Sensory Service is a centralised, single specialist service that operates from 5 offices across Northern Ireland. Referrals to the Sensory Service usually come from paediatric audiology services in health and social care trusts and are managed through a single point of referral. The Sensory Service works with an interdisciplinary range of professionals across education and health, as well as voluntary sector agencies.

The Sensory Service supports deaf children with and without Statements of SEN. The level of support provided is determined by the National Sensory Impairment Partnership Eligibility Framework (NatSIP), which has been adopted by the Sensory Service.

Whilst this Framework is designed to provide the basis for a fair allocation of available resources, it relies on professional judgement and should only be used as part of a full assessment by a qualified professional. Professionals will know that use of the Framework is leading to effective identification of support when children and young people are making good progress and achieving good outcomes.

Currently the Sensory Service can use professional discretion in special circumstances based on the individual circumstances of a child to, for example, provide an increased level of support at different times in their education.

A key part of the ToDCYP role is to monitor deaf children's progress and to work towards agreed outcomes with parents and carers and early years and school settings. All deaf children who receive any level of Sensory Service support are placed on Stage 2 of the SEN Code of Practice (the stage before a statutory Statement of SEN is in place) and should have an education Personal Learning Plan/Individual Education Plan, developed with ToDCYP input. Deaf children who receive regular support from a ToDCYP have their outcomes recorded in family plans for pre-school children and service intervention plans for school-aged children.

In relation to Statements of SEN, the Sensory Service provides reports and educational advice where children are undergoing statutory assessment. The Sensory Service cannot make direct referrals for statutory assessment where a child is in an educational setting, as these must be made by the school but can do so for children under 5 years of age.

In addition, the Sensory Service currently facilitates 2 parent and toddler groups and there are plans to increase this offer, while acknowledging the challenges of the low incidence of deafness and of offering such a service across rural areas of Northern Ireland. Implementing an early detection and intervention strategy is expected to improve communication and language development in deaf children. Early years intervention is an important part of provision for all sensory services.

> Deafness can often be identified from birth or in early years, offering an opportunity to provide SEN support and Statements of SEN, where appropriate, including in pre-school years. Where deafness is identified later in childhood, for example, through progressive hearing loss, trauma or infection, the principle of access to early specialist support should also apply.

The Sensory Service identifies deaf children as being on either an active or advice caseload. Those who are identified as being on the active caseload receive high-frequency visits from a ToDCYP and may have some direct teaching intervention as well as receiving an Annual Review report written by their ToDCYP. If the child has a Statement of SEN, this report will serve as part of their SEN Annual Review. ToDCYPs attend Annual Review meetings for all deaf students they directly support, amounting to approximately 11 Annual Reviews for each ToDCYP with current caseloads.

Deaf children on the advice caseload may not receive direct support from ToDCYPs on an annual basis. They do receive an assessment check or a visit at key transition points or if their education setting changes. If a child has a Statement of SEN, a ToDCYP report can be used in their SEN Annual Reviews. ToDCYPs attend SEN Annual Review meetings on request or if they judge it necessary. Support levels are not fixed and are open to review to reflect adjustments dictated by children and young people's needs.

Currently the Sensory Service is operating under an interim structure, indicating that changes are needed. A structural review of the Sensory Service is recommended to ensure that sufficient staff are employed with a diverse range of roles and qualifications to provide the best set of support options for deaf children and their families.

5.4.1 Resources to support high-quality services

There are several resources that guide sensory services and others to provide high-quality support and improve educational outcomes for deaf children and young people. While some of the resources highlighted have been developed for support services in England, they provide a helpful reference point. These include:

The National Sensory Impairment Partnership (NatSIP) Quality Standards for Sensory Services in England (2016)[22]

This is designed to: support services in self-evaluation of their provision; enable staff, leaders and managers to consider responsibilities and roles; help parents to understand what they may expect to be in place; and support service improvement planning, including engagement with children and their parents. A self-evaluation tool is included.

The National Sensory Impairment Partnership (NatSIP) Eligibility Framework for Scoring Support Levels (2017)[23]

This was developed for use by sensory services offering support to children, young people and their families and educational settings (except for specialist provisions). It provides a tool for sensory services to guide decision-making over support allocation for individual children using systematic consideration of a range of relevant factors.

The Framework states it “should not be interpreted and applied as a rigid set of criteria” but enable services to provide an equitable allocation of their resources, identifying and justifying the levels of support required as well as informing staffing levels. The Framework relies on professional judgement and should only be used as part of a full assessment by a ToDCYP.

[22] NatSIP. Quality Standards for Sensory Services. natsip.org.uk/natsip-documents/natsip-documents/quality-improvement-for-services/01-quality-standards-for-sensory-support-services/1044-quality-standards-for-sensory-support-services

[23] NatSIP. Eligibility Framework for Scoring Support Levels. natsip.org.uk/doc-library-login/eligibility-framework/00-eligibility-framework-summer-2017-edition/916-eligibility-framework-document

The National Deaf Children's Society Quality Standards for Early Years Support for Children with a Hearing Loss, aged 0 to 5 (2016)[24]

This supports the joint commissioning of services in England by setting out standards that providers should meet. It is recommended that commissioners of education, health and social care services use these standards not only to inform their procurement of services, but also to assess the quality of services involved in supporting deaf children aged 0 to 5 years old. An accompanying self-evaluation tool helps services to evaluate their work, identify gaps and work towards improvements.

Family Centred Early Intervention Principles for Children who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing (2024)[25]

Designed as a guide for early intervention providers, programs and families, this international consensus reflects the latest research and evidence-based best practice that should guide the development and delivery of early years services for deaf children. Across 10 principles, it emphasises a strengths-based approach, promotes family choice and control, and recommends the development of collaborative relationships between families and professionals.

British Association of Deaf Teachers of Children and Young People Specialist Deaf Curriculum Framework (2024)[26]

This was produced to support children and their families to develop knowledge and make informed and independent decisions about their deafness, from identification through to adulthood. The Curriculum Framework aims to identify areas of specialist support and good practice that can raise awareness of deafness and improve the independence of deaf children and their families. It also seeks to enable discussion, through a shared language about deafness, between deaf children, families, schools and other settings, as well as with ToDCYPs and the other professionals who work with them.

The Curriculum Framework consists of 7 core areas with outcomes, suggestions for interventions and signposting to resources in each area. The Framework will help with joint working with mainstream class teachers.

In addition to the resources noted above, the 'Quality improvement support pack' (2016)[27] from the National Sensory Impairment Partnership (NatSIP) has been produced to support ToDCYPs and other education professionals to evaluate their provision against the quality standards developed by the NatSIP and the National Deaf Children's Society.

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[24] NDCS. Quality standards Early years support for children with a hearing loss aged 0 to 5.pdf
[25] FCEI International. Family Centred Early Intervention Principles. FCEI fcei.at/dl/nNNLJmoJKOkkJqx4KJKJmMJKIKML/FINAL-FCEI-GuideBook-print_pdf
[26] BATOD. Specialist Deaf Curriculum Framework. batod.org.uk/resources-category/specialist-deaf-curriculum-framework/
[27] NatSIP (November 2016 edition). Quality Improvement Support Pack. natsip.org.uk/doc-library-login/quality-improvement-for-services/quality-improvement-support-pack/730-qi-support-pack

5.4.2 Outcomes and evaluation

All the quality assurance standards and resources support the development of outcomes frameworks and evidence-based practice to improve service delivery that promotes quality evaluation. Outcomes can be tailored to the specific context and needs of each child, which can range from broad goals like ensuring appropriate educational placements, to specific objectives like developing age-appropriate communication skills. Additionally, outcomes can be derived from various sources, including Individual Education Plans/Personal Learning Plans, group targets, or provision plans. They can also include outcomes for parents, schools, early years settings, other partners and staff.

The NatSIP 'Quality improvement Support Pack' (2016) encourages sensory services to demonstrate ambitious vision, high expectations and high standards of support for all children, which can be shown through, for example, service performance reporting (Quality Standard D1).

By adopting a more outcome-focused approach, the Sensory Service can ensure that interventions are evaluated based on their effectiveness within the broader context of other educational supports. This approach aligns with the need for consistent evaluation methods and collaboration with organisations like NatSIP, which aims to improve outcomes for children and young people with sensory impairments.

> A quality sensory service is one that consistently reviews and improves its methods through the application of relevant quality standards, using evidence-based practices with outcome measures as a key source of evidence. It is important to note that outcome measures are of limited value unless used to evaluate and improve practice.

6.0 Summary of findings from stakeholder engagement

Findings from engagement centred on the activities and performance of the Sensory Service and its relationships with other services, parents and children.

6.1 Strengths

6.1.1 Teamwork and collaboration

Sensory Service staff themselves highlighted team collaboration and multidisciplinary working as strengths. They work closely with health, social care, voluntary sector organisations (such as the British Deaf Association, Action Deaf Youth and the National Deaf Children's Society) and EA internal teams like the psychology service, as well as mainstream and special schools. Schools with dedicated resource provision and the specialist school for deaf and visually impaired children talked about having strong links with the Sensory Service. They also noted the range of advice and support provided by the Sensory Service, such as support

for assistive listening devices and the responsiveness of the Head of Service to any queries or issues arising.

Sensory Service staff felt the views of deaf children and young people and parents and carers are central to its work, ensuring the child is the focus. Additionally, there is good communication among staff, who respect, value and support each other in both professional and personal matters.

The staff acknowledged that strong leadership has supported service development, resource growth, opportunities for continuous professional development and support for new employees. They also appreciate administrative support for their service activities.

ToDCYPs believe that an area of strength for the Sensory Service is their attendance in audiology clinics and providing direct contact and support for newly diagnosed babies and their families. They consider themselves as being responsive and providing immediate visits, in line with good practice based on NatSIP Quality Standards. There is commitment from all staff to implement equality, diversity and inclusion in all aspects of their everyday work. The team highlighted their commitment to ongoing training as they follow children through their educational journeys, providing continuing support and training across different provisions.

Discussion revealed that, while many aspects of the Sensory Service work well, there is still room for improvement in resource distribution and service consistency across Northern Ireland.

6.1.2 Staff development and innovation

The Sensory Service employs a relatively high percentage of ToDCYPs who are deaf and provide role models for deaf children and their families. Staff retention is high.

Whenever possible, the Sensory Service engages in research studies, for example, the recent Caption Education Project, in which captioning software used for note-taking and captioning could help support the way deaf children and young people learn.

The Head of the Sensory Service allows and encourages ToDCYPs to develop specialisms and interests, for example in early years, mental health and the Caption Education Project.

Other stakeholders were pleased to note a positive change in recognition of sign language in the Sensory Service, especially with upcoming legislation under the Sign Language Bill.

6.1.3 Relationships with children and families

Most children stated they feel they do well in school, enjoyed school some or all of the time, including break and lunchtimes, and that they had friends in school. Many parents praised their ToDCYP for their pre- and post-teaching sessions, liaison with mainstream schools and advocacy for their children.

“The ToDCYP really advocated for my [child] to get extra support that [they] need.”

More than one parent or carer described their ToDCYP as their “rock” and as “going above and beyond” in supporting their children, being a first point of contact, sorting out any issues arising and reassuring parents that “we are going to work through this together”.

“My [child] is the first one in my immediate family who is deaf. So, it was a shock! But we felt really well supported.”

“The ToDCYPs were there, the whole way through.”

“The ToDCYPs organised ‘stay and play’ sessions once a month. I got to meet all the parents and their babies. My [child] is still friends with them.”

Parents and carers were affected sometimes because a change of ToDCYP was sometimes forced by circumstances, such as, the Sensory Service’s operational limitations. They stressed that a change of ToDCYP should not occur at the transition points when children are changing school.

“When changing allocation of ToDCYP, both children and parents should be involved in this decision to ensure that the change works best for the child rather than the service.”

“I mean my [child] does not cope with change and transition. Why on earth do they change ToDCYP at the same time as [they] moved… school?”

Change could be good though, with one parent whose child had a number of ToDCYPs commenting that “… each of them have been quite different, but positive in different way”.

6.1.4 Deaf identity

Deaf identity and positive role models were important to parents, with one saying “the most positive impact is the work my [child’s] ToDCYP did around deaf identity and confidence. That was just phenomenal!”

Another welcomed the fact that a ToDCYP allocated to their child was deaf, providing a positive role model: “It’s lovely for our kids to see adults who are deaf and to see how much they can achieve.”

6.2 Challenges

The Sensory Service team shared their experience of various challenges, such as geographic isolation, difficulties covering staff sickness or leave and the need for more specialisation to cater for the diverse needs of deaf children and young people. Priorities identified by the Sensory Service in the 2024–2025 period include: sign language, early years and the Family Centred Early Intervention Principles.

6.2.1 Sharing information and multiagency working

Some Sensory Service staff and other professional stakeholders referenced difficulties in sharing information between services and observed that communication could be improved. This included professionals knowing who to contact directly in the Sensory Service, which ToDCYP is responsible for a child and sharing

information on how individual children are managing in their schools and homes. It was also suggested that it would be helpful for the Sensory Service to have information and leaflets for families.

Parents also raised the issue of communication between services, with one suggesting "… just maybe having different professionals talking to each other…" would make a difference, and a professional noting that setting up multidisciplinary meetings can be difficult.

Another stakeholder noted there was opportunity for the Sensory Service to develop closer relationships with other organisations such as the National Deaf Children's Society, the British Deaf Association and Action Deaf Youth to further support collaborative working, while some highlighted that establishing a CHSWG in all health and social care trust areas would be positive.

The National Deaf Children's Society's 'Quality Standards: Early Years Support for Children with a Hearing Loss, aged 0 to 5' state that education, health and social care services should work together to make sure assessments are, where possible, joined up to give a complete picture of a child's needs, and to ensure that children and families receive high-quality provision and support.

6.2.3 Skills and training needs

One stakeholder noted that Northern Ireland has a greater proportion of deaf children and young people with additional or complex needs compared with England. Parents also raised this issue, with one commenting that for "children with varying levels of hearing loss and other conditions – that's when it gets complicated to get the right support and [that] needs to be looked at." Specialist training is needed for ToDCYPs on conditions other than deafness and complex presentations and appropriate interventions.

Other stakeholders also had several observations about training needs. Some issues were anticipated when the Sign Language Bill comes into place, especially in relation to training, qualifications and capacity. A parent noted, "I would love for ToDCYPs who are providing sign language to deaf children to have a higher level of sign language, level 3 or 4."

In addition, the Sensory Service and other stakeholders are aware of difficulties in the recruitment of classroom assistants with sign language skills, which is associated with a professional shortage and difficulties in attracting trained classroom assistants. There is a possibility of further complications when sign language provision is needed and Statements of SEN may not specify the sign language level required for staff to meet a child's language and communication needs.

The NatSIP 'Quality Improvement Support Pack' (2016) encourages sensory services to show the service provides effective support for families and education settings in meeting children's assessed needs by having specialist staff with training, knowledge and skills in a range of areas, including working with babies and infants, children with additional complex needs and children for whom English is a second language (Quality Standard B4).

6.2.4 Staffing and workload

There is a need for more specialised staff to cater for the needs of all deaf children and young people. The team highlighted difficulties in providing cover when a ToDCYP is off sick or on leave and a lack of opportunity for career progression.

The Sensory Service can be viewed by other services and parents as the ‘fixer’ for all sorts of issues. Staff in the Sensory Service noted this can take time away from direct work with deaf children and young people and other ToDCYP work.

Staff in the Service also shared concerns about the continuous need to train and upskill Classroom Assistants, who may then leave their roles, resulting in a child’s needs being unmet and a repeated cycle of training.

Among their top priorities, the Sensory Service team identified recruitment, retention and succession planning to prepare the organisation to support deaf children and young people with a wider range of needs that require new skills and knowledge from ToDCYPs. These priorities link with a need to reorganise the Sensory Service to allow career progression, whilst defining specialisations and new roles to address the profile of deaf children’s needs, especially in the areas highlighted by the Sensory Service, such as, early years and sign language. ToDCYPs support children across all age groups, so a lead role in, for example, early years could lead development in this area and provide support for other colleagues with young children on their caseload. The Sensory Service also had ambitions to embrace new technology and communications options for families, such as, auditory verbal therapy.

6.2.5 Geography

Specialist education settings (the two mainstream schools with resource provision and the specialist school for deaf and visually impaired children) are based in the Greater Belfast area. Sensory Service staff noted that this led to inequitable access to services for children across Northern Ireland. This was also raised by other stakeholders along with lack of access to a nursery setting with resource provision in Northern Ireland. Parents also pointed to there being value in having more sessions for pre-school aged deaf children close to their home, where children could meet deaf peers and family-to-family support could be facilitated. A professional stakeholder also noted that further development of early years support would be beneficial.

Staff from the Sensory Service had longer travelling times when serving large geographical areas which reduced time for other tasks such as administration. In addition, children attending schools with resource provision or the specialist school for deaf and visually impaired children in the Greater Belfast area may have long daily journeys, which can add to fatigue and impact the range of after-school activities offered and attended. Staff wanted to address geographic isolation and inequality of access to provision and support.

6.2.6 The advice caseload

Some parents and carers felt that the level of support in the Sensory Service eligibility criteria should be led by the individual and holistic needs of the child rather than being determined only by deafness or hearing loss level according to the NatSIP criteria. Parents felt this would allow provision to be better tailored according to need.

Some parents felt that some children needed more frequent support than was set by the advice criteria for working with deaf children. One parent felt that the advice pathway did not allow for a good relationship to be built with the child:

“ToDCYPs should build up the relationships with the child. Seeing a child once a year, there is not going to be any relationship. What are they doing for the child, except for the annual review?” Another commented that they would like all deaf children to have a monthly visit from a ToDCY.

The NatSIP ‘Quality Improvement Support Pack’ (2016) encourages sensory services to demonstrate parents have high levels of satisfaction that the service is meeting their child’s needs. This could be measured through, for example, regular surveys of parents. Sensory services could also work with education settings to ensure good links are developed with a child’s home by, for example, parents receiving regular information on the support their child is receiving and their progress (Quality Standard B6).

6.2.7 Timely support

Parents had experienced gaps in provision during the school summer holidays. This is a particular issue when deafness is identified at this time, as the Sensory Service broadly operates to school term calendars. A parent whose child was identified in spring stated they saw the ToDCYP 4 months later because of the summer holidays. One parent was not referred to Sensory Service at the point of identification but was later referred by the National Deaf Children’s Society.

The National Deaf Children’s Society’s Quality Standards for Early Years Support for Children with a Hearing Loss states that a ToDCYP should contact the family 2 to 5 days after a referral has been received and should visit within 10 working days.

Stakeholders also experienced difficulties getting support from other services. One parent said, “One of the problems for us is lack of access to specialist speech and language therapists.” It was noted that long waits for services like ear, nose and throat appointments could lead to children with temporary hearing loss being issued with hearing aids rather than receiving surgical treatment like grommets. When this occurs, the Sensory Service can have limited resources to support these children.

Parents also talked about challenges in getting other education services. One parent commented that, for example, their child could not access support from the EA autism team without them first attending a parental course and delays in getting classroom assistant support were also raised:

“[My child’s] classroom assistant didn’t start on day one, [they] started one month later. So, my [child] was without support for the whole month.”

While relationships were mostly good with the Sensory Service, some parents had faced challenges with the support provided and some children said they felt their ToDCYP only understood what they needed some of the time. Importantly, children also had mixed views on whether they had a say in decisions about the support they received.

6.2.8 Additional needs

Some parents felt it was left up to them to find out information about services and support available for their children, including speech and language therapy and the Deaf Child and Adolescence Mental Health Service, rather than receiving this from ToDCYPs.

As noted earlier, a small number of parents shared negative experiences about the Sensory Service in relation to low-frequency visits in special or mainstream schools. They also felt that their children’s deafness was ‘brushed off’ by schools and that the Sensory Service had not made a difference.

Where children had a wider range of needs, some parents felt their ToDCYP had limited knowledge about other conditions, and that it was not clear to them, as parents, what good practice is or what expectations they should have for their children’s support. They wanted the Sensory Service to have the capacity to see children once a month and to have a better understanding of deaf children with additional or complex needs.

Others felt that communication between professionals needed to be better where deaf children had additional or complex needs.

“What seems to be happening is that children are looked at through the lens of deafness only, with very little cross-services communication.”

“… we just don’t have the hearing loss, we have the impact of other conditions. So, I definitely think looking at the whole picture, not just one element, is needed.”

“When you go to look for support, you find NDCS or you find a [specific] support group. It is very hard if you don’t fit here and you don’t fit there. It is hard to find where you do fit in.”

6.3 Ambition and vision

It is important to acknowledge that work is ongoing in a number of areas in the Sensory Service including, for example, in the planning and approach to work with pre-school children. Strong ambitions were expressed by all stakeholders about providing the best possible services for deaf children in Northern Ireland. This includes making sure that training for all professionals covers the diverse needs of deaf children and their families, including in early years and for children with additional or complex needs, and that there is capacity to meet any requirements of the Sign Language Bill.

This vision depends on a suitable structure being found for the Sensory Service going forward, effective resourcing and the attention of policy-makers on the needs of deaf children in the wider SEND reform programme.

7.0 Discussion

7.1 Improving the EA Sensory Service

In a rapidly changing SEND landscape, it is important to have a clear vision and strategic direction for how educational support for deaf children will be delivered and evaluated to ensure that children's individual needs are being addressed. This report has provided a valuable opportunity for a range of stakeholders to share views about how support should be provided for deaf children, young people and their families. Based on reviewed Sensory Service documentation and the wider views of stakeholders, it is important to stress that the Sensory Service is working towards achieving its ambitious priorities of high-quality service provision and is making steady progress. However, in order to fully achieve these ambitions, additional changes and resources are needed.

There was broad consensus that while a dedicated specialist Sensory Service should continue to play a central role in the delivery of educational support for deaf children, aspects of the current Sensory Service need to evolve to reflect current and proposed developments in relation to SEND and the changing profile of deaf children and young people in Northern Ireland.

The Sensory Service is a busy one with a high level of specialised demands. This is an important consideration. Engagement with the Sensory Service, professional stakeholders and deaf children and families revealed that there are aspects of the way it is structured that could be improved and strengthened to provide more effective support.

The Sensory Service has undertaken work to improve data recording and streamline its policies and procedures, ensuring these are up to date. A 'Service Handbook' is being developed, which will include information about service delivery, policies and procedures to ensure staff provide a consistent, high-quality service. The Sensory Service also has plans to conduct an annual survey of parents and children to inform delivery and provision.

7.1.1 The Sensory Service structure

The Sensory Service has traditionally had a flat structure, with ToDCYP postholders and administrators reporting directly to the Head of Service. In addition to the full-time Head of Service post, there are 25.8 full-time equivalent ToDCYP posts, 2 of which are also qualified educational audiologists who fulfil this role while continuing to hold a small caseload. There is also an administration team consisting of one senior clerical officer (currently vacant) and one executive officer, who perform a range of administrative duties and tasks to support the Sensory Service.

A limitation of this flat structure is that it does not adequately support staff specialisation, career progression or succession planning. It also means that it is challenging for the Head of Service to fulfil the senior leadership job description. For example, the Head of Service currently has 45 direct reports, making undertaking staff appraisals and regular supervision a challenge. Another layer of management would allow for senior and expert ToDCYPs to take more responsibility and progress in their careers.

7.1.2 The interim structure

An interim arrangement was put in place in March 2023 until June 2025 to introduce two senior ToDCYP roles, although no backfill of their former ToDCYP posts was included. This interim arrangement and other efforts to improve performance are positive and indicate recognition that the Sensory Service should be strengthened. Additionally, work is ongoing in the EA to recommend additional posts and specialisms in the Sensory Service.

The future strategy for the Sensory Service and its configuration should be based on an evaluation of outcomes it achieves, and include the views of deaf children, young people and their families.

7.1.3 Management and leadership

It is recommended that a new management and leadership structure is developed for the Sensory Service to ensure the Head of Service role is supported by a deputy post in each of its areas, for example, in deafness and in visual impairment. The deputy should have the mandatory qualification for the area of specialism and provide professional oversight and direct management.

7.1.4 Training needs

It is important that all ToDCYPs employed by the Sensory Service hold the mandatory ToDCYP qualification. There is currently no mandatory qualification training for ToDCYPs available in Northern Ireland and this should be placed under consideration. It was suggested that an apprenticeship route for training, which is currently not available in Northern Ireland, could be explored. Stakeholders noted support could be made available to Northern Ireland teachers wishing to train as ToDCYPs and to further assist with teaching placements in other jurisdictions. Training and development pathways for communication support workers, specialist classroom assistants or similar roles in Northern Ireland should also be considered.

Consideration should be given to how the Sensory Service can develop and improve its support to children in early years and/or with additional or complex needs, as well as other areas the Sensory Service may wish to develop, such as audiological management and transitions to adult services, within the new structure. Stakeholders also suggested that funding should be made available for further training in sign language. It is also important that newly created positions are supported in developing their management skills combined with their specialist expertise in deaf education.

7.1.5 Working with a diversity of roles in the Sensory Service

There is a need for the Sensory Service to diversify the roles that support deaf children and their families. Roles such as, communication support workers and specialist classroom assistants would extend the service that could be delivered to children while freeing up ToDCYPs to deliver other support services across the caseload.

7.1.6 The structural demands of the Sensory Service

The structure described above indicates a Sensory Service under strain, which is likely to have an impact on efficiency and effectiveness, requiring additional resources to ensure it is sustainable going forward. Although staff retention is good, retirement is likely to affect this in the coming years. Encouraging specialisation and improving opportunities for career progression would enhance the attractiveness of the ToDCYP role and encourage more people to train and qualify. Changing the flat structure would ease the workload of the Head of Service and allow for some career progression for senior staff. Introducing additional roles, like communication support workers who would support ToDCYPs and diversify the offer to children and families, would be beneficial. Ensuring access to both initial mandatory ToDCYP training and continuous professional development is important.

7.1.7 Pathway for deaf children

The work of the Sensory Service could be better supported by the development of an integrated pathway for deaf children. This would provide a collaborative and multidisciplinary approach to ensure that children and their families receive comprehensive and coordinated interventions, and support to address clinical and educational needs, including technology, communication needs and access to a language-rich environment.

An integrated pathway would include a focus on early identification, assessment and intervention, as well as ongoing support to ensure children have access to the services they need to thrive. This can include different pathway strands for different cohorts of children, such as those in early years or with additional or complex needs. The pathway should be supported by detailed protocols and procedures as well as professional guidelines and quality standards across the services included in the pathway. These may include, for example, the Sensory Service, education services, paediatric audiology, speech and language services, children’s social care, voluntary sector organisations and others.

There are strong benefits of an integrated pathway for deaf children. A pathway approach can differentiate between different cohorts of children to ensure a tailored response that can improve outcomes for children, reduce disparities and increase efficiency, because a more coordinated approach reduces duplication of services while children receive the most appropriate and timely support across the pathway.

8.0 Recommendations

The report makes eight recommendations to improve the EA Sensory Service and provision for deaf children, young people and their families. Many of the recommendations reflect themes highlighted in the Department of Education's 'End to End Review of Special Educational Needs (SEN)' and can support work to progress the 'SEN Reform Agenda'.

The recommendations were drawn from the findings of engagement with all stakeholders.

Recommendation 1

Deaf children to be included in Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) reforms

The Department of Education's 'Special Educational Needs Reform Agenda' must place equal emphasis on deaf children and young people. To develop effective and adequately resourced support services, reforms should be based on evidence about and from deaf children and their families. Reform must take account of the needs of deaf children and should address issues like delays in commencing SEND legislation and multiagency working between services, such as education and health.

The Sensory Service should remain a centralised, specialist service for deaf children, young people and their families, with teams operating across Northern Ireland. Additional support should be provided to ensure the Sensory Service is sustainable and can meet the diverse needs of deaf children and their families.

Recommendation 2

Earliest possible support for deaf children

Although not all types of SEND can be diagnosed in infancy, deafness can often be identified from birth through the Newborn Hearing Screening Programme or in a child's early years. This creates opportunities for joint working with health and social care services and for providing early interventions across all areas of child development. Teachers of Deaf Children and Young People (ToDCYPs) play a critical role in early years intervention through direct work with deaf babies, children and their families.

The Sensory Service should continue work to further develop early years support and should consider developing a robust pathway for deaf children in early years with education, health and social care services, voluntary sector organisations and deaf children and their families. This should include: setting out clear policies on how every young deaf child and their family are supported; exploring pre-school or nursery provision for deaf children; making sure children and families are supported from the point of referral, regardless of the school calendar; and putting in place a programme of specialist training.

This principle of early specialist input should also apply where deafness is identified or occurs later in a child or young person's life including for example, where this occurs through progressive hearing loss, trauma or infection.

Recommendation 3

Tailored support for children who have additional or complex needs

The percentage of deaf children with additional or complex needs is increasing year by year. How deaf children with additional or complex needs are supported by the Sensory Service in mainstream or special schools, including where deafness may not be the primary need, should be prioritised. Upskilling is also needed in the Sensory Service workforce to support these children and their families at home. This should be reflected in the development of a clear pathway in the Sensory Service's framework for deaf children with additional or complex needs.

Recommendation 4

Information and support for all deaf children

Information for deaf children and families, including those on the advice caseload, should be reviewed to ensure that children and families receive tailored information about how the Sensory Service allocates and provides support to children and how the support provided meets the needs of deaf children and young people. Seeking feedback from families, schools and other professionals, to gain a holistic understanding of a child's deafness and its impact, alongside other factors and vulnerabilities such as additional needs, can support resource allocation and make sure that children receive the support they need.

A new structure and framework for the Sensory Service, with a wider range of roles and responsibilities, may make it possible to manage this more effectively.

Recommendation 5

Increase opportunities for professional collaboration and communication

Communication and multiagency working between professionals working with deaf children needs to be improved. This relates to both support and services for individual children and families but also opportunities for professionals to discuss wider concerns and identify and address gaps in services for children and families across areas. Children's Hearing Services Working Groups (CHSWGs), where services, professionals, voluntary sector organisations and parents can meet to discuss issues for deaf children, are not in place in each health and social care trust area. These, or similar mechanisms that support multiagency communication and collaboration, should be considered. This would provide opportunities to ensure that clear pathways in the planning and commissioning of services for deaf children and families are in place, and support co-production of pathways across all stakeholders.

Recommendation 6

Workforce planning and enhancing training for Teachers of Deaf Children and Young People (ToDCYPs)

Strong links should be made with training providers to ensure that there is a pipeline of suitably qualified professionals from which to recruit. Training for ToDCYPs being available in Northern Ireland should be explored. At the same time, a long-term programme of specialising, skills upgrading and career progression should be encouraged in the Sensory Service to further improve retention of existing staff and improve the offer to deaf children and their families. This could include support: for early years; for children with additional or complex needs; and for children across all approaches to communication, including sign language. This should also explore training and development pathways for other deaf specialist roles, such as communication support workers and specialist classroom assistants, to support service sustainability and succession planning.

Recommendation 7

Equitable geographical spread of educational services

Specialist educational provision for deaf children, such as schools with dedicated resource provision, should be available outside of the Greater Belfast area to make sure that all deaf children and their families can equitably access an education appropriate to their needs.

There can be benefits in resource provision that is led by a qualified ToDCYP and centrally managed by sensory services to provide a level of flexibility in allocating and adapting resource and support to meet needs. Arrangements between the Sensory Service and schools with resource provision should be reviewed. Consideration should also be given to whether the Sensory Service managing this provision directly would be beneficial, offering increased flexibility in providing deaf specialist support to children across Northern Ireland.

Recommendation 8

An evidence-based, outcomes-focused approach to service delivery

An evidence-based, outcomes-focused approach to service delivery and evaluation is recommended. This involves tailoring outcomes to the specific context and needs of each child, which can include broad goals like ensuring appropriate educational placements, as well as specific objectives like developing age-appropriate communication skills. Agreed and consistent data should be used to identify deaf children and monitor, track and report outcomes. Planning and evaluation should include the views of deaf children, young people and their families, and regular feedback from children and families should be developed.